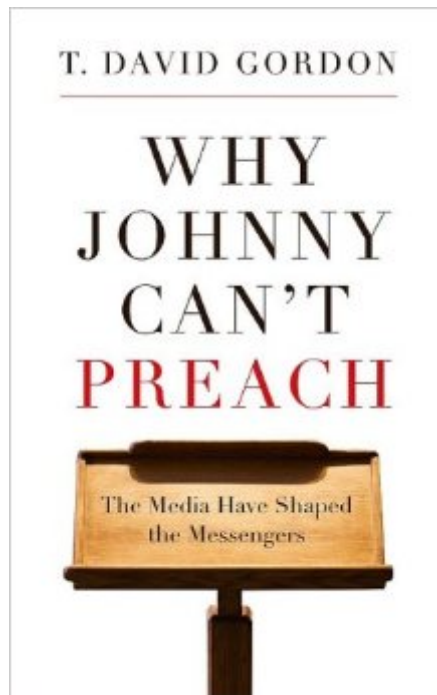


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Why Johnny Can't Preach: The Media Have Shaped The Messengers



Synopsis

T. David Gordon has identified a problem that affects us all and needs to be fixed. Today's preachers are not speaking the language the congregation understands and needs to hear. Fortunately, Gordon not only diagnoses the causes of this failure but also shows us remedies for improvement.

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Customer Reviews

Seventeenth century Puritans produced some of the greatest preachers in Christian history. As far as I know, those preachers had nothing comparable to a modern seminary education. But what they did have was university training that required the careful reading of texts in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. The Puritan minister was therefore the product of a language-based educational system. Far more than most modern pastors, including myself, he was at home with biblical texts. In addition to his university training, he likely served as a tutor to children of the affluent, and because of his pedagogical responsibilities, became a skilled expositor of ancient texts. All of this proved to be invaluable preparation for extraordinarily fruitful pulpit ministries. Which brings me to T. David Gordon's *Why Johnny Can't Preach: The Media Have Shaped the Messengers*, about the modern preacher and his ability both to read biblical texts and communicate compellingly their God-breathed truth. The minister's work is demanding: he must not merely assert the point of his sermon; he must fulfill "his duty of demonstrating that what he is saying is God's will." (18) Sadly, he often seems unaware of his solemn duty, and, even if he is, he finds himself woefully prepared to discharge it adequately. *Why Johnny Can't Preach* is a pre-homiletics book. It has little to say about the how-tos

of crafting a sermon but much to say about the literary sensibilities and habits of learning a preacher must possess - prior to undertaking the work of sermon construction. These cannot ordinarily be learned at seminary; the ministerial candidate must master them earlier as he studies in academic environments that prize the careful reading, interpretation and exposition of texts.

This book is only 105 pages - and I read it last night - but boy does it pack a punch! The title is a take on the famous books by Rudolf Flesch is the 60's *Why Johnny Can't Read: And What To Do About It* & *Why Johnny Can't Write: How To Improve Writing Skills*. This book does not mince its words - and there is a reason for this. David Gordon was diagnosed with cancer and his initial prognosis of survival was 25% chance. As a professor and former church pastor he felt he could not die until he had written about the poor preaching which is prevalent in our church today. He wrote this during the 11 months of treatment he received for the cancer - hence it is blunt and deliberately so. For Gordon, less than 30% of ordained church ministers can preach at best, a mediocre sermon. The other 70% simply cannot preach. He recounts a story of a humble, godly elder who, having been asked by Gordon if they realized the new pastor they had just hired could not preach, replied "of course we know he could not preach." He went on to say that in the 30 years of being an elder he had never met a pastor who could preach - and that his rotary club has better public speakers. This challenged Gordon - who in his own experience has generally found the same experience. Now, this is not about the 'stars' of preaching. This is not trying to say we need to be George Whitefields, or Jonathan Edwards, or Charles Spurgeon. Gordon's point is that in the average church, with the average congregation, the average pastor is unable to deliver even a mediocre, competent sermon. Gordon argues that there have been presentations, films, plays or concerts where we have watched without once looking at our watches or thinking "when will this end".

Nineteen sixty-six saw the publication of a book titled *Why Johnny Can't Read*. Its author, Rudolf Flesch, explained in it that societal changes were leading to illiteracy; children were increasingly unable to read, at least with the effectiveness of the children of years gone by. By the 1980's, Linden and Whimbey had followed with *Why Johnny Can't Write* in which they showed the similar societal trends were now keeping Johnny (a generic name used to refer to any child, male or female) from expressing himself in writing. T. David Gordon has self-consciously titled *Why Johnny Can't Preach* after these books because he uses it to argue that the same societal trends that kept Johnny from being able to read and write have kept a generation of ministers from being able to preach. Johnny just can't preach and Gordon just can't take it anymore. It is important to the context

of this book to realize that, when he wrote it, Gordon believed he had only months to live. He had stage III colorectal cancer and had roughly a 25 percent chance of survival. "Having been concerned about the state of preaching for three decades, I believed that it would be irresponsible to leave the world without expressing my thoughts about the matter, in the hope that better preaching might be the result." So this book has the air of a missive penned from a dying man and directed to dying men (though, happily, Gordon's cancer is now in remission). As he says, "The manuscript is, therefore, at a minimum, heartfelt." I can think of at least a handful of books that have called contemporary preachers to task for their weak sermons or the unbiblical focus of their ministries.

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